

# Winking as Social Business

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## Introductory note from the Editors

*A good thick description will identify the kinds of “social business” that take place in an interaction. As you read this chapter, begin to think about the social business that takes place during your daily interactions with others. What does social business have to do with questions of values, identity, or power? How can thick description help you identify the social business? Finally, what does thick description have to do with the “reflexive awareness” that Jane Goodman calls for at the end of the chapter?*

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Clifford Geertz describes ethnography as the process of creating a description thick enough to unpack what it means when a boy contracts his eyelid. Is it a twitch, a wink, or a parody of a wink? It is the *social business* the wink accomplishes that sets a wink apart from a twitch. The twitch, as involuntary muscle activity, involves no social business per se – unless, of course, someone interprets the twitch as a wink, in which case the boy might have some explaining to do. (It is perhaps worth noting that some involuntary twitches, such as those experienced by politicians during high-stakes debates, can be taken as signs of nervousness and thus become part of social discourse and social business.) The wink, on the other hand, helps to shape the flow of social discourse. It carries a social intention and can be socially interpreted. Perhaps the wink signals complicity in a joke. Perhaps it is part of a flirtation. Perhaps, as parody, it is an attempt to undermine or make fun of the flirtatious attempts of another.

Social business refers to the ends that are achieved in particular interactions and to the larger questions of values, identity, or power that inform and emerge from these interactions. What does a “flirtatious” wink accomplish in a particular situation? How might that interaction be linked to others in a larger social organization of gender? Does a “flirtatious” wink mean the same thing between people passing each other on the streets of New York as it would at a Midwest fraternity party? Under

what social conditions would a wink signal romantic interest? When might it be considered insulting? Or, if a wink is used in a joking relationship, does it help to cement the friendship of a group of boys by creating an "insider" identity? Social business refers to how people exercise power during such interactions and to how people create identities and values through social discourse.

How do we go about describing an activity and defining its social business? What tools can we use for telling a twitch from a wink from a parody? How do we tell a joke from an insult or a benevolent word from an autocratic declaration? How do the social businesses of the separate acts of winking, joking, insulting, or making political promises articulate with a wider social organization? And how do we talk about that?

It is not an easy process. We see interactions and hear conversations every day, but we usually don't ask ourselves, "What is the social business?" Edward Sapir (1949 [1927]: 558) once commented that it would be "useless and even mischievous" for individuals to be aware of all of our unconscious patterns: pronouncing vowels in the way that others around us do, or picking just the right words to make the specific points we want to make. We can become aware of these patterns and choices, but only if we set our minds to it. To do so, we must take a step back and reflect critically on events and interactions that we usually engage in without a second thought. In other words, we must develop a *reflexive awareness* of what goes on around us. Developing this reflexive awareness is the first step in doing ethnography.

## Reference

- Sapir, Edward. 1949 [1927]. The unconscious patterning of behavior in society. In *Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*, 544–59. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.